FLORIDA IN EARLY SPANISH COLONIAL LITERATURE

BY

WILLIAM RICHARD JACKSON, JR.

B.A., University of Miami, 1939
M.A., University of Minnesota, 1948

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN SPANISH
IN THE GRADUATE COLLEGE OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, 1952

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The purpose of this study is to present and discuss various aspects of Florida as viewed by the Spanish writers of the time of Spain's colonial expansion and the years immediately following.

The period of Spanish discovery and expansion nearly coincides with the first three-quarters of the 16th Century. It began with the discoveries of Columbus, and by the time of the death in 1574 of Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, who had established the first permanent European settlement in Florida in 1565, it had practically come to an end. While Spain continued consolidating and colonizing her empire in the New World, by the end of the 16th Century further discovery and colonial expansion in the hemisphere, with the exception of some success in extending Spanish rule along the Gulf coast of North America and in the region north of Mexico, had become the prerogative of other European nations.

Florida, which for some years after its discovery by Ponce de Leon was thought to be an island and afterward designated in a broad sense most of the territory north and east of Mexico on the North American continent, was a land of mystery and a subject of controversy for the Spanish during all of the 16th and well into the 17th Century. Not only was its extent to the north and west unknown, but the distance that lay between Mexico and "La Florida" was a matter of uncertainty and usually of misconception for many years.

The lack of knowledge regarding "La Florida" when combined with the reports of its strange and variegated natives, its animals, its plants and what seemed like its almost limitless expanse, brought back by the relatively few Spaniards who had gone into its interior, furnished a field for imaginative writing and speculative reporting by authors of the time. There was serious discussion of the possible existence of a Fountain of Youth, tales of giants and of almost incredible

feats of archery and physical prowess performed by the Indians. There were descriptions of its great forests and rivers. One author in the last half of the 16th Century reported that unicorns had been seen there.

The controversial element of the writing on Florida was based mainly on two questions: 1) the worth of the colonization of Florida in relation to what it had cost, and was costing in Spanish lives and money; 2) the conduct of the *conquistadores* in regard to the Indian, and the reasons behind their failure to establish a colony in Florida in the years before the founding of St. Augustine.

The question of the cost of colonizing Florida was, in addition to being involved in strategic and religious considerations, bound up with the possible presence of riches in the form of gold, silver or precious stones. The question of the conduct of the *conquistadores* in Florida was, and is, a part of the larger question of Spain's policy in the New World.

For consideration in this study the subject of Florida in the Spanish literature of the 16th and 17th Centuries has been divided as follows:

1. The writers' legend of Florida.
2. Gold, silver and pearls in the accounts of Florida.
3. Florida as a land of plenty or a land of poverty; a land of promise or a land of despair.
4. Some aspects of the Indian character, ethics and religion in relation to the Spaniards.

In considering the writers' legend of Florida the interest has been mainly in evaluation of the factual content, literary qualities and the sources of several common opinions of Florida and its natives as expressed incidentally in their work, or as they recur in the form of anecdotes, exposition and integral divisions in their work.

The word "legend" is applied to this aspect of the writing on Florida in the sense that it was common literary property

and not because it was necessarily fabulous.

The first two divisions of this "legend" concern Ponce de Leon, the reasons and circumstances of his discovery, the Fountain of Youth, and the naming of Florida. The remaining five divisions of the legend concern the physical stature of the Indian, his prodigious archery, his physical prowess, the recurrence of hurricanes, and the Florida of Cabeza de Vaca.

The title of the second division of this study; namely, "Gold, Silver and Pearls in the Accounts of Florida," may seem to indicate that it belongs with the consideration of "Florida as a Land of Plenty or a Land of Poverty," and these two aspects of the writers' Florida are indeed closely related, as they are involved with the matter of the Spanish intent, success and failure in the colonization of Florida. The subject of gold, silver and pearls receives such extensive treatment at the hands of the writers, however, that it merits separate consideration.

The writing on these forms of riches might be grouped as follows, although no such strict division has been attempted in discussing it: 1) the quest of gold, silver and gems as a motive of those who undertook the conquest of Florida and their failure as colonists because of the predominance of this motive; 2) reports, tales and descriptions of gold, silver and pearls in Florida.

The Indians of the peninsula from most accounts appear to have been able to provide themselves with an abundance of food in the form of game, shellfish, fish and other animals of the sea; wild fruit, and corn and vegetables that they cultivated. Yet, the Spaniards according to the accounts were frequently starving or on the verge of starvation. Consideration by the writers on the matter of Florida's abundance or poverty may be viewed as taking two forms: 1) the immediate problem of subsistence of the Spaniards who were in Florida; 2) the view of Florida as a source of future wealth from agriculture, live-stock, timber, pelts and fisheries.

In spite of all that has been written about them, the

aboriginal inhabitants of Florida remain much of a mystery. In this study there has been no intention of going beyond a brief survey of the Indian character, ethics and religion in relation to the Spaniards, as viewed and related by the Spaniards. Although the character, ethics and religion of the Indian are not always inseparable in the writers' treatment of them, they are so related in the views of the writers, as they were in the Spanish mind of the time, that there has been no attempt to adhere to a strict division of them in considering this aspect of the writers' Florida.

Consideration of the subject cannot be confined to definite statements of their opinion by the writers. In addition to the Florida Indian that emerges as a vague, incomplete composite picture from the relation of events in which he is involved, Indian character is an important literary element in several of the works. He occupies a principal place in the long, almost novelistic version of the vicissitudes of De Soto's army which its author, El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, entitled *La Florida.* He is the central figure of several poetic descriptions in the *Relación* of Fray Andrés de San Miguel.

Although this investigation has been centered to more or less the same degree as that of the literature under discussion on the peninsula, which was called "Florida proper," or "Florida in particular" by some Spaniards of the time, there has been no maintenance of a division between Florida in the larger sense, and Florida in the narrower sense; that is, the Florida which extended from Mexico to Labrador, and the Florida of the peninsula. Some writers in treating the Indies indicated a distinction between Florida in the larger and official sense and Florida in the narrower sense in making two broad divisions: the Florida of the west, toward Mexico, and the Florida of the eastern part of the continent. However, the theater of Spanish activity, and hence Spanish knowledge of the land, was confined in the east to the southeastern portion of the continent. This southeastern portion of the continent is, roughly, the Florida of the Spanish writers of the 16th and 17th Centuries and the Florida of this study, although the

generalizations of Cabeza de Vaca and the wanderings of De Soto's army may occasionally take it farther west.

The Spanish authors under consideration are those of the 16th and 17th Centuries. They were known as historians, poets, geographers, biographers, chroniclers and as composers of *relaciones* and *memorias*. In trying to classify them today the simplest method would be to place them in the category of what they claimed to be as writers. But those, for example, who described their works as "histories of the Indies" included in their "histories" autobiography, medical and biological science, philosophy, classical lore, cosmology, theology, zoology and botany; together with numerous anecdotes and treatises on the particular axes they had to grind. The work of one of the great poets of the Indies has an important historical content; on the other hand, one writer of a *relación* of what he observed in Florida is a poet in prose. The writers on the expeditions of Pedro Menéndez de Avilés and De Soto are biographers, journalists, historians, naturalists and writers of adventure novels.

The "historians of the Indies" are a large and important segment of the writers under scrutiny, and some reference to the historical background of the subject is desirable for a fuller understanding of the work of the writers. This study has not proposed, however, to contribute to the history of the Florida of the 16th and 17th Centuries, but rather to study the Florida of those centuries as a subject of literature and evaluate to some extent the work of the writers as literature.

The authors under consideration may be classified as follows.

Those who had been unwilling inhabitants of Florida: 1) Álvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca; 2) Hernando de Escalante Fontaneda; 3) Fray Andrés de San Miguel.

Those who wrote about the expedition of De Soto: 4) Rodrigo Ranjel; 5) Luys Hernández de Biedma; 6) The Fidalgo de Elvas; 7) El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega.

Those concerned with Pedro Menéndez de Avilés and his colonization of Florida: 8) Gonzalo Solís de Merás; 9) Bartolomé Barrientos; 10) Francisco López de Mendoza Grajales.

The historians of the Indies: 11) Pedro Mártir; 12) Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés; 13) Bartolomé de las Casas; 14) Francisco López de Gómara; 15) Antonio de Herrera.

The Spanish writers of Mexico: 16) Juan Suárez de Peralta; 17) Fray Juan de Torquemada; 18) Bernal Díaz del Castillo; 19) Fray Agustín Dávila Padilla.

The poets: 20) Juan de Castellanos; 21) Bartolomé de Flores; 22) Fray Alonso de Escobedo.

The cosmographers: 23) Juan López de Velasco; 24) Padre Joseph de Acosta.

Two of these authors were neither of Spanish birth, nor did they write in Spanish. But they enter intimately into the picture of the Spanish exploration of Florida and Spanish literature of the time, and are of importance in this study.

One, Pedro Mártir, was a native of Italy who adopted Spanish nationality, and occupied a high place in the courts of Ferdinand and Isabella, and Charles V. Not only was he an official Chronicler of Spain, but among several other important positions in Spain he was also one of the members of the Council of the Indies. He wrote in Latin.

The other, an anonymous Portuguese who used the nom-de-plume Fidalgo de Elvas, was with Hernando de Soto in his travels through "La Florida," and wrote in Portuguese.

Any classification of the most important writers on Florida as their work enters into this study must admit of broad overlapping. One may place eight of them in two groups: 1) the chroniclers of expeditions; 2) those who wrote from personal experience and observation in Florida. Two others, Pedro Mártir and Cabeza de Vaca, both of whose works contain

accounts of expeditions, and one of whom spent ten years in "La Florida," are important in a sense that does not allow the placing of them in either of the two groups.

The chroniclers of expeditions whose work has occupied a primary place in this study are Oviedo, Garcilaso, the Fidalgo de Elvas, Dávila Padilla, Barrientos and Solís de Merás.

Two writers, Fray Andrés de San Miguel and Escalante Fontaneda, based their works on personal experience in Florida, and their accounts are concerned almost entirely with their experiences and observation. For this reason they may be classified separately, although this excludes the several eyewitness accounts of expeditions, and the *Naufragios* of Cabeza de Vaca whose principal importance for this study is its influence in the broader geographical concept of Florida.

The two portions of Oviedo's great "General History" of the Indies devoted to Florida are the narratives of the expeditions of De Soto and Narváez. Since the narrative of Narváez' expedition and the adventures of the four survivors is for the most part a reproduction of the "Joint Report" prepared by the survivors, and is almost identical with the *Naufragios* of Cabeza de Vaca, its principal importance as far as this study is concerned has been that of comparison with the *Naufragios.*

The narrative of the expedition of De Soto by Oviedo, on the other hand, is one of the four primary sources of information on that expedition and the regions through which it traveled; the other sources being the *Relação verdadeira* of the Fidalgo de Elvas, *La Florida* of the Inca, Garcilaso, and the report of Biedma, which is very brief and relatively unimportant in a comparison of its factual and descriptive detail with that of the other three works. The narrative of the expedition as found in Oviedo's *Historia general* is really the narrative of Rodrigo Ranjel, who was De Soto's secretary and a member of his army in Florida, to which Oviedo added interpolative comment.

The four accounts of the De Soto expedition vary widely,

not only in factual content, but also in the manner and viewpoint of the writers in their narration. There is also much conflict of fact as presented by the four authors.

In the use of descriptive detail, largely imaginative, Garcilaso's narrative contrasts sharply with that of Oviedo. Of all the works considered in this study Garcilaso's *La Florida* stands out as an example of the imposition of imagination on a structure of authenticity. Garcilaso has elaborated on dry fact for the sake of a good story, and in the interest of probing and portraying the character of the protagonists in the events described. Garcilaso's account, too, is based on that related by a former member of De Soto's army. As in this case it was by word of mouth, one cannot know, even approximately, how much of the narrative to attribute to the imagination of Garcilaso, or to that of his informant.

The account of the Fidalgo de Elvas is concise. Its interest for the reader lies in the course of the narrative rather than in description of its background or the character of its protagonists. As a member of De Soto's expedition he speaks with authority and seems less interested than any of the writers on the expedition, except Biedma, in creating interest by relation of the marvelous. He may even be found exasperatingly casual in some of his references to events and situations which are described more fully by Oviedo and Garcilaso.

One might call Dávila Padilla a historian of his order, a historian of the Indies, a biographer, or a moralist in basing classification of him on the *Historia de la fundación.* He purported to write the history of the Dominicans in Mexico by treating the lives of its "varones insignes." Thus, he was a historian of his order and a biographer. In following the lives of the "varones insignes" he narrated their adventures and the vicissitudes of the expeditions of which they were members. Thus, his work contains three narratives of outstanding importance in the literature on Florida: that of the attempt of Fray Luis Cáncer and his four companions to conquer Florida by religious faith; that of the expedition of Tristán de Luna;

and that of the tribulations of the Spaniards who attempted to reach Mexico overland after being shipwrecked on the Florida coast, in 1553. The title given to the third edition of his work some years after his death, *Varia historia de la Nueva España y Florida,* describes the work better than its original title. As a moralist he was a disciple and an ardent admirer of Las Casas and his precepts. In castigating De Soto and other Spaniards who had been in Florida he displays the penetrating irony, the ingenious metaphors and the polished aphorisms, which together with the expression of great personal interest in the events narrated, characterize his work.

The full titles of the *Vida y hechos* of Barrientos, and the *Memorial* of Solís de Merás describe their works as biographies of Pedro Menéndez de Avilés with emphasis on his conquest and colonization of Florida. In both works the chapters previous to the entrance of Pedro Menéndez into Florida constitute a long introduction to his deeds as *Adelantado* of Florida. Pedro Menéndez remains the principal figure of both biographers, while the figures of some of his officers and the Indian chiefs emerge briefly and sharply as they come into contact with Pedro Menéndez; then they recede into the shadowy periphery of the *Adelantado's* activities. In much the same way the land which was the background of Pedro Menéndez' greatest enterprise appears in brief glimpses in their writing; that is, as related to the endeavors of the *Adelantado,* rather than for its own importance. Both biographers did express firmly and often their conviction that for strategic and religious reasons Florida should be colonized; and in doing so the French Huguenots who preceded Pedro Menéndez to the region occupy the place of miscreants throughout their accounts, not only for their attempted usurpation of Spanish territory, but also for the influence they were believed to have had on the Indian.

Two works of great importance for this study in so far as the peninsula is concerned are those of Fray Andrés de San Miguel and Escalante Fontaneda. Both are based on personal experiences in the peninsula; both authors were in the penin-

sula in the latter part of the 16th Century after Pedro Menéndez' founding of St. Augustine, and both confine themselves almost entirely to their experience and observations with little concern for events occurring in the peninsula at the time. Beyond that there is hardly any similarity between the two accounts.

A gentle humor runs throughout the *Relación* of Fray Andrés. It is based on the author's keen observation of the Spaniards and Indians around him during his sea voyage, his shipwreck, and his stay in Florida. When Fray Andrés chooses to describe a scene in Florida it is often a scene of poetic beauty. He had an eye for natural beauty and poetic detail which he often combines with humorous understatement and mild resignation to the situation in which he found himself.

The *Memoria* of Escalante Fontaneda does not possess chronological sequence, geographical order, or adherence to any sort of order in his consideration of the "costa y cosas y indios de la Florida." It is a rambling, disconnected succession of reminiscences, autobiography, description, observation, and some narrative. It is valuable for the information that it contains in regard to the Indians of south Florida and the character of the plant and animal life there at the time. Of special interest to this study are his considerations on the Fountain of Youth, the expression of his opinions regarding the character of the Indian, and his views and recommendations on the colonization of Florida.

The *Decades* of Pedro Mártir occupy a place by themselves. In this study he is important for his long report and serious discussion of the Fountain of Youth, and also for his recording of the marvelous tales brought back from the Carolina coast by the Spaniards and the natives taken from there.

One might attribute too much credulousness to Pedro Mártir, as did Oviedo, unless account is taken of the time in which he was writing, those years of the discoveries of Columbus and the early voyages to the New World, when every

ship that returned from the Indies brought reports of new discoveries and new marvels. Mártir's serious discussion of what later proved to be fabulous may have been the result of a desire to display his classical erudition, or his familiarity with the classical myths may have influenced his willingness to lend earnest consideration to the possibility that yet undiscovered wonders existed in the world.

One may summarize the subject of Florida as viewed and presented by the writers as follows, basing such a summary on contrasting bodies of opinion.

The Fountain of Youth

Mártir is the only one of the writers considered who treats with grave thought the possible existence of a Fountain of Youth, but he is among the very first writers on the Indies, and the first of any renown to write on the region of the Bahamas and Florida. It is only when writing in later years that Oviedo and Castellanos ridicule belief in the legend, and that Gómara and Herrera mention it with little or no expression of opinion in regard to its validity. Mártir says that the possible existence of such a fountain was being widely discussed in Spain in 1514. Oviedo, Castellanos, Gómara and Herrera all state that Ponce de Leon went to Florida or "Bimini" in search of the Fountain; and all three state or imply that Ponce de Leon was not alone in his belief in the possible existence of such a fountain. Fontaneda says that it was "cause for laughter" that Ponce de Leon went to Florida in search of the Fountain, and yet states that many Indians from Cuba had been for years crossing to Florida in their canoes in search of the Fountain — or in this case, the River of Youth — and that even the Florida Indians had become convinced that there were such miraculous waters in their land.

Other Legends of Florida

The legends of the great bodily stature of the Florida

Indians, their prodigious archery, and their physical prowess as set down by the writers have, evidently, on the whole, a basis of authenticity, although a few of the writers have overlaid this basis of fact with exaggeration and fanciful detail. Garcilaso's *La Florida* is the outstanding example in this respect.

Gold, Silver and Pearls in the Accounts of Florida

According to the writers, the only gold or silver to be found in Florida was that which the Indians had acquired from shipwrecks. In general they attributed the motives and the disastrous failures of the expeditions prior to that of Pedro Menéndez de Avilés to the search for gold and silver. The concept of Florida as a land rich in pearls had its principal origin in the expedition of De Soto, and the accounts of Oviedo, the Fidalgo de Elvas and Garcilaso of that expedition. The reports and descriptions by these writers of the great amount of pearls found by the army of De Soto were incorporated into the works of other writers.

Florida as a Land of Plenty or a Land of Poverty

It appears that the two extremes of the writers' views on Florida in regard to its worth and fitness for colonization emanate from two expeditions: those of Narváez and De Soto. While the *Naufragios* of Cabeza de Vaca did much toward establishing Florida's reputation as a land of poverty which was hardly worth colonizing, the accounts of De Soto's expedition — that of Rodrigo Ranjel as contained in Oviedo's *Historia general,* and that of Garcilaso, later — told of riches to be found in Florida, and counteracted to some extent the concept of Florida contained in the *Naufragios.* Detailing of the bounty of Florida by the writers on the expedition of De Soto did not mean that they endorsed the colonization of Florida.

In the first place, the writers believed that the intractable character of the Indian, together with the fact that the Indians

of "La Florida" were separated by language, customs, and allegiance into many tribes and clans were great obstacles to the colonization of Florida. Some of the writers, especially Oviedo, believed that any attempt to colonize Florida was a waste of Spanish lives and money.

In the second place, there were writers who deplored the preoccupation with gold of the *conquistadores,* and others who expressed a belief that there were riches to be found in Florida, but that they would be acquired only by colonization and development of the land. For them the wealth of Florida consisted if its timber lands, its broad pasture lands for the raising of live-stock, its fitness for all varieties of agricultural cultivation, the abundance of fish and shellfish in the waters of its coasts, the pelts of its fur-bearing animals, and the other products to be obtained from the land and its forests.

The Character, Ethics and Religion of the Indian

From the Spanish viewpoint, as conveyed by the writers, any resistance by the Indians to the political and religious hegemony of Spain was unjustified. Some of the writers in judging the Indian in the light of their own nationalistic and religious convictions attributed many of his acts in opposition to the Spaniards to a naturally treacherous and evil character. Others, while not condoning his resistance to the Spaniards and to Christianity, believed that his hostility had been brought about by initial injustices and unwise policies practiced by the Spaniards. The Spanish viewpoint of the time is most logical considering the situation. At the same time it is remarkable that those who defended the Indian to the detriment of the Spaniard, those who were convinced of the complete justice of Spanish action, and those who were between both extremes of opinion, considered what were the undoubtedly cruel and deceitful practices of the Indian in warfare only as an opposition to the Spaniard, without taking into account his reaction to any invader of his homeland. Las Casas and Dávila Padilla envisage to some extent the hostility of the Indians toward the Spaniards from this point of view, but

their considerations in this regard are usually overshadowed and lost in their thesis that the cruelties and injustices of the Spanish brought about the Indians' hostility to Spanish domination.

The religion of the Florida Indian is in the same manner considered in relation to that of the Spanish, its superiority or its inferiority increasing as it approaches or recedes from that of Catholic Christianity.

VITA

William Richard Jackson, Jr. was born on May 5, 1917, in Jacksonville, Florida. He attended Lake Worth High School, and Riverside Military Academy, from where he graduated in 1934. In 1939 he received the degree of Bachelor of Arts from the University of Miami. In the years 1942-45 he served with the United States Army in England, North Africa, Italy and France. In the academic year 1946-47 he was Assistant in the University of Minnesota, from which institution he received the degree of Master of Arts, in March, 1948. In 1948-49 he held an assistantship at the University of Illinois. He was Instructor in Spanish at the University of Georgia in 1949-50. He held a fellowship in the University of Illinois during the academic year 1951-52.